

Challenges to Local Governance in the Pandemic Era

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*Perspectives from South Asia
and Beyond*

Edited by

John S. Moolakkattu
and Jos Chathukulam

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PREFACE

This volume is the outcome of an international webinar on *Rethinking the Role of Local Governments in a Post-COVID-19 World* organized under the joint auspices of the Centre for Gandhian Studies, Department of International Relations & Politics, Central University of Kerala, and Centre for Rural Management (CRM), Kottayam, Kerala, India, from 10 to 14 December 2020. As many as 63 presentations were made at the webinar by participants worldwide. Apart from introduction and conclusion, the volume contains eighteen chapters selected from the papers contributed by the participants. At the local level, an acute need to manage the pandemic exists. A volume building on the experiences of local governments in South Asia and beyond in pandemic management was found particularly relevant. The volume seeks to make health a central concern for decentralization enthusiasts and policymakers dealing with local government issues. We are thankful to the scholars who chaired the different webinar sessions and Dr. Uma Purushothaman, Central University of Kerala, for compering them. Ms. Asha Buch, Ms. Manasi Joseph, and Ms. Rekha V acted as rapporteurs. The staff of CRM provided the necessary logistical support. Mr. Jithin Mathew, Ph.D. candidate, Department of International Relations, Central University of Kerala, who was also a rapporteur of the webinar, helped us with the formatting of the contents of the book and provided essential editorial support. Professor Joseph Aye of the University of Ghana delivered the keynote address. Professor H. Venkateswarlu, the Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Kerala, graciously inaugurated the valedictory session. All the contributors have benefited from the rather lively discussions that followed the different presentations, and we are indebted to all the participants. We also thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for expressing interest in the webinar, which eventually led to this volume.

John S Moolakkattu
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INTRODUCTION

JOHN S. MOOLAKKATTU
& JOS CHATHUKULAM

People all over the world are making frantic efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Governance has become a daunting one in most countries. In some countries, citizens have responded to governments' call to practise self-responsibility quite commendably. A mix of measures, including some tough ones infringing on human freedom, have been tried in most others. Local governments everywhere seemed to have responded more effectively to prevent the spread of the virus. In some countries, their actions were more effective than intervention by provincial and central governments.

In many cases, local governments are entangled in a multi-level governance system with federal systems accounting for more layers or tiers. The relative capacities of each level and the complementary or non-overlapping manner in which their powers are structured also add to their governance effectiveness. The pandemic provides an opportune moment to revisit the role of local governments the world over. Local governments can persuade people to observe lockdowns and curfews and pay fines when violating physical distancing restrictions. They can redesign infrastructure to maintain social distance and educate people through signage and other means (Wray, Fleming and Gilliland 2020).

There has to be a movement for further decentralization based on the principle of subsidiarity. COVID-19 has raised challenges related to the financing of the local governments, the loopholes in the mandate on health given to local governments, and the extent to which they can handle health matters on their own. More important is the continued delivery of services and protecting the people's livelihood even as the local governments are engaged in pandemic management. Perhaps in tackling the humanitarian side of the pandemic, the local governments' role is most visibly felt. Since local governments are closest to the people, they will have a more remarkable ability to influence behavioural changes among their constituents, particularly relevant during a pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged governments' emergency preparedness everywhere at all levels, especially at the local government level. It is far removed from many local governments' learning in managing natural disasters. The pandemic has brought new knowledge, but it is not meaningful without adequate capacity to put it into practice. Capacity gaps are of two kinds: resource capacity and pandemic-impacted capacity. A resource-poor local government will be stretched beyond its means to cope with the pandemic. Even resource-rich local governments may be badly shaken due to the lack of resilience of the local economy. We also have a scenario of a resource-poor panchayat getting damaged thoroughly after the pandemic (Dzigbede, Gehel and Willoughby 2020). This makes resource and governance capacity crucial for effective local government intervention in COVID-19 containment.

A typical local government should detect imported infections by limiting the entry of air and surface travellers into their jurisdiction through surveillance measures. A decentralized approach is critical in a public health emergency, especially when it lasts long. Decentralized production and marketing are often needed to instill local resilience and economic recovery instead of highly centralized structures. A pandemic has an isomorphic connection to disasters in terms of processes and containment strategies. While central capacity is helpful as a resource to be tapped by the other levels, it is decentralized capacity and the ability to work with different jurisdictions in a multi-level governance system that matters. Some countries have done well on this count. The UK faltered by centralizing measures during the onset of COVID-19, eventually giving way to a decentralizing approach when the situation worsened. At the same time, questions relating to the nature of the executive at the local level, the range of functions that should be devolved to that level, and the ability of local governments to raise their own resources by expanding their revenue base have become important points for debate and enquiry.

Good governance in itself may not lead to good COVID-related outcomes. There could be factors that could totter even robust systems of governance when a pandemic assumes an unpredictable character. Morbidity and certain cultural styles of people may lead to a rapid spread of the pandemic, but how the affected are cared for is a matter of governance. The central principles of governance are related to decision-making. Left with very little reliable information, decision-making during a pandemic requires a high degree of governance ability to cope with the uncertain and the unknown. On such occasions, it is always good for countries to learn from each other's experiences.

Knowledge should ideally be co-produced by the different actors situated within a multi-level governance system. In Switzerland, the cantons and the counties had already initiated some measures even before the national government ventured to address the pandemic. The local governments could not initiate such actions in the UK, severely hit by the austerity measures beginning from the 2008 global financial crisis. The mutual learning and co-production of knowledge, which was the forte of the Swiss case, was absent in the UK, where a one-size-fits-for-all centralized approach was initially adopted. In other words, “decentralized capacity alone is not sufficient to generate a response like that seen in Switzerland, but it benefits from the relationships among the different levels of governance being constructed in a manner conducive to mutual learning and integration” (Gaskell and Stoker 2020,36).

Local governments are composed of representatives whom most people personally know. They are known for their closeness to the citizens compared to their counterparts at larger spatial levels and the bureaucrats. This closeness makes them more sensitive to local needs and can better mobilize the community for collective action. They can keep track of various local government activities and evolve strategies specific to the local context. Since they belong to the locality, any failure to be responsive to the public can hamper their re-election efforts and affect their reputation (Agrawal and Ribot 1999; Faguet 2014). Further, since people generally trust them compared to other levels of government, they have greater legitimacy in the people's eyes. Such trust and legitimacy are crucial during pandemics to prevent people from becoming panicky (Fischer 2016).

The local governments' ability to negotiate context-specific local conditions, reach out to the public, and command trust from the citizenry is crucial in the current crisis. The task of social regulation in the context of COVID-19 may generate conflicts between different local government functions. Working with police to enforce strict lockdowns could counter the people's friendliness that characterizes local representatives. Yet, the local governments are more capable of coping with such contradictory pressures than any other level of government (Dutta and Fischer 2021).

In many Latin American countries, local governments played a crucial role in containing domestic violence during the pandemic (Lima, 2020). In places like Taiwan, a collaborative approach was adopted, and the neighbourhood warden at the lowest level was a key actor in pandemic management. France, which has a unique deconcentrated system, resorted to a sort of hyper-centralism initially, which turned out counterproductive.

Local governments responded to the crisis through horizontal cooperation and governance by involving local actors. In other words, the crisis response moved between centralization, decentralization, and eventually to a form of horizontal governance (du Boys, Bertolucci and Fouchet 2021).

New temporary and permanent infrastructure was created by local governments in New York, Milan, Paris, Toronto, and Seattle. In New York, the local government hired many unemployed people to undertake sanitization and cleaning. Cities like Chengdu, Istanbul, and Seoul deployed technology-intensive means to track and enforce physical distancing. Local governments in Auckland, Lagos, Nottingham, Manila, and Ottawa came down with a heavy hand to enforce strict lockdowns with fines, which affected particularly the poor and those living in informal settlements. It is seen that those local governments that focused more on investment and education than on punitive restrictions had a more sustainable impact (Wray, Fleming and Gilliland 2020).

The Chinese case is an interesting one. The dominant role of the communist party enables the central leadership to steer all the local governments in a command and top-down manner during emergencies. This is implemented cascadingly with similar command structures set up at the local level as well. The communist party secretaries of Hubei Province and Wuhan City, the epicentres of the virus outbreak, were replaced by senior party functionaries appointed from the centre. Officials who performed well in emergencies received quicker promotions and public recognition in China (He, Shi and Liu 2020).

One issue is the lack of adequate information disclosure. Some have associated it with panic. The degree of tolerance that people have when lockdowns are imposed is dependent on the level of democracy. In some western democracies, revealing health information relating to individuals may be seen as a kind of intrusion into their privacy. But at the same time, people are often prepared to accord their safety a higher priority than freedom in such circumstances. For them, such measures will enhance public confidence in the ability of the local government to fight the pandemic and bring in a certain degree of urgency. The local government is thus a crucial actor in reducing panic (Gray and Ropeik 2002).

Trust in local government can moderate risk perception and enhance the effectiveness of prevention efforts. However, we are not sure how trust in local government affects the relationship between information disclosure and panic in pandemics; perhaps it works by strengthening the indirect

effect of perceived prevention effectiveness or weakening the indirect impact of risk perception. A study in China showed that “higher levels of trust in local government result in stronger indirect effects of perceived prevention effectiveness” (Liu et al. 2020, 217).

Further, good governance is not synonymous with bureaucratic command and control effectiveness. The ability to rope in as many stakeholders beyond the bureaucratic channel is necessary. To do that, local governments can play an intermediary role in the public governance system, which has more to do with meta governance than governance proper (Gao and Yu 2020).

Another issue is the existence of multi-tier local government in countries like India with varying degrees of coordination among the tiers in individual provinces. In a state like Kerala, the lowest level alone was involved in containment measures and vaccine distribution. The health-related mandate of the local governments is not often spelt out in clear non-overlapping terms. In cases where functional clarity exists, the local government may lack the capacity to perform the assigned functions. Local governments need to develop a certain degree of professionalism on their own or tap expertise externally. Either way, what is required is to work with multiple actors. Then, there is the problem of uneven spread of medical facilities. Most medical facilities in India are concentrated in urban centres. So, the ability of local governments to bring such hospitals under their purview is severely constrained. In Kerala, some rural local governments are sufficiently endowed with multi-specialty hospitals in their jurisdiction, while some may have none in their vicinity. When working with several actors, the conventional understanding of bureaucratic dominance needs to give way to a partnership model. This presupposes a certain degree of self-denial on the part of the bureaucracy. In most cases, the local governments seek instructions from above to move forward rather than take their own initiatives (Chathukulam and Tharamangalam 2021).

The Chinese example is proof of the effectiveness of a locally-based system of lockdown enforcement without involving the army and the police. Since 2004, China has had a system of “grid governance,” which was put to use to enforce lockdown and identify the infected. Still, the centre took over the reins of the local government by removing the Mayor of Wuhan and party secretary of Hubei province, substituting them with persons close to Xi Jinping (Ren 2020).

In some countries like the US, the pandemic provided an opportunity to forge new relationships with other local governments and reinforce existing ties amid a financial crunch. This came about due to the lack of action either at the federal level during the Trump administration or even at the state level, forcing the local governments to repose their faith to fend for themselves. Such self-reliance through horizontal alliances has enabled local governments to meet the crisis with a certain degree of credibility (Benton, Rissler and Wagner 2020).

Take the case of rural Bangladesh. The lowest rung of the rural local government is the Union Parishad, which alone can motivate people to stay at home. However, the bureaucracy at the Union Parishad level is not people-friendly. The rural inequalities and domination by the local elites also stand in the way. Bangladesh has a robust Disaster Management Act applicable up to the grassroots level (Tarikul Islam 2020).

A survey of mayors in Italy showed that adaptive leadership and anticipatory governance to cope with emergencies were needed during pandemics. They also emphasized public value co-creation, using technology as a medium for sharing information and crowdsourcing resources, and safe and trusted platforms for knowledge sharing among the mayors and with the relevant organizational stakeholders. The Italian mayors are directly elected and have the mandate to ensure public order, security, and even some judicial functions besides service delivery. In the Italian case, modern communication provided mayors with the opportunity to communicate quickly, clearly, and to several citizens at once (Garavaglia, Sancino and Trivellato 2021).

In Germany, there was the problem of crisis coordination among different levels of government. In the first phase, the subnational and local governments were the main actors mandated by the federal law on infection prevention. The primary responsibility of health rests at the municipal level. In contrast, more vertical coordination was established during the second phase of 'intergovernmental centralism' when infections arose. This was reversed during the third phase when the infection rate came down, eventually reaffirming the importance of the subnational and local governments in pandemic management. Essentially, the local governments in Germany could engage in local-specific containment measures. However, the pandemic led to a rethinking of the intergovernmental system (Kuhlmann and Franzke 2021). Hattke and Martin (2020) say that Germany's distributed authority at the local level, unlike France and the U.K., elicited a better response in pandemic management, which they describe as a 'wicked' problem. However, they caution that this may not be applicable in disaster responses

where a centralized approach is relevant. The COVID-19 pandemic is a test of how pressures are built on inter-governmental relations in crisis management situations among the three levels with varying capacities and resources.

In the absence of decisive action by the central government and inadequate information, some local governments in the Czech Republic led by dynamic mayors have implemented measures such as production and wearing face masks on their own without waiting for central directions. Some mayors who demonstrated that the municipality could be run without state assistance became popular for their boldness and efficiency. In neighbouring Slovakia, many local governments were handicapped by information deficits. The local government associations partly addressed this. There was also ineffective vertical cooperation following the unpreparedness of the newly formed central government to take on the task of pandemic management. In sum, horizontal communication channels were more efficient than vertical ones. This is comparable to the French system. In both France and Slovakia, the national governments drew on innovative measures by sub-national governments (Juptner and Klimovsky 2021). Many local governments worldwide have used the full power of social media for social communication, building trust among people and easing their fears.

Different policy capacities can exist within a single state or province. In one case, the situation may look bright, but it may not be so from another context. This is the case in Kerala. Kerala's health system was never overwhelmed, unlike in many other states. Yet, the state had to cope with a high test positivity rate (TPR) for months together. In many other states in India, the surge was more episodic. But not so for Kerala, where it showed a higher degree of persistence than any other region in India. The Indian case also indicates that more than the local government, the states came to the forefront, initially acting in tandem with the centre and subsequently being on their own. The states carried out their management tasks primarily through the bureaucratic machinery except when food and quarantine-type needs emerged. In other words, the local governments did not have any say in the formulation of the policy. Though made available to the rural areas, the health infrastructure is still not under the direct control of the local governments. Hence they were involved primarily in tasks unrelated to treatment and more in providing the necessary social support to the needy.

In Nepal, the local governments focused on awareness generation activities to address the knowledge gap relating to the pandemic. For enforcing lockdowns, security forces available with the local governments were

deployed. The central and provincial governments were not there to give them the necessary support. The local government addressed this problem by seeking community engagement in pandemic-related activities (Adhikari and Budhadhoki 2020). Another study conducted in Nepal found that the case fatality rate was much lower in provinces where the local governments had more robust local development and disaster plans than those without them (Mainali, Tosun and Yilmaz 2021).

Take another example. We have the seemingly successful China's governance system, a decentralized one in a centralized authoritarian system of government where the local government does not have accountability to the constituents like in liberal democracies. In other words, it is easy to transform the state from a decentralized system to a centralized one in times of crises using the communist party's command and control system, as happened in Wuhan. The accountability is to the party high command in such cases (Mei 2020).

From 2021, with the advent of vaccines and mass testing, we see the balance shift from dealing with the immediate health crisis to its enormous social and economic impact and long-term effect on people's wellbeing. It has at least heightened concern about how health providers and local authorities need to work together. While national and regional governments have enough leeway to get things done through centralized procedures, the dynamics of the pandemic are so unpredictable that local governments, which are closest to the ground situation, need to be intimately involved in all containment measures. Kerala, which claimed to take the lead in COVID-19 containment, eventually became the only state in the country with the highest TPR and caseload, which suggests premature complacency at the state level without involving local governments in widespread consultation can cancel out the early gains. There has been a dramatic enhancement of the powers of the heads of village panchayats in Orissa by granting them magisterial powers supported by the necessary resources to enforce quarantine for returning migrants and deter those violating lockdown rules. This led to fewer complaints from the citizens compared to many other states. But they are exceptional and of an episodic nature.

In sum, the health of people, especially during the pandemic, is often determined by several social factors. The ability of people to maintain social distance and impose quarantine is impossible in slums where people have a huddled existence. Vaccine distribution also is an issue. In many developing countries, the approach to such distribution may be disadvantageous to the poor and the marginalized. People who survive daily require social support

when the source of the income disappears following the loss of jobs. More than the health part, it is in addressing these inequities and livelihood issues of the poor, the elderly, the physically challenged persons, minorities, and so forth that local governments have a crucial role.

This book has four sections. The first section deals with the experience of India in general. The second examines the cases of individual states in India. The third section provides an account of the local government's initiatives in other countries of South Asia. The final section covers stories of COVID-19 containment from the rest of the world.

The chapter titled *India's Local Government: The Need for Major Reforms* by Buddhadeb Ghosh looks into the autonomy deficit and the many 'unfreedoms' plaguing local governments in India from a historical perspective and how it has adversely affected the management of COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Ghosh argues that local governments, particularly the panchayats (rural local governments) in India, are weak institutions, as they have little autonomous space in terms of resources and administrative powers. Ghosh further argues that panchayats in most of the states in India function as mere implementing agencies and not institutions of self-government. The author contends that the fathers of the constitution made a 'colossal blunder' by not establishing a "linkage between local government and the practice of democracy at the local level." The author states that the dissociation of the objective of deepening democracy from the institutionalization of panchayats has been the major stumbling block in realizing their potential. Though the Government made significant attempts in India to revitalize the institutions of panchayats, such attempts failed to bring considerable changes, and the empowerment of local governments remains an 'unfinished task' even today due to the 'colossal blunder.' The author feels that the objective of securing a space for local democracy in the country's structure should be equally considered as the task of deepening democracy.

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered the first pan-India biological disaster handled by the legal and constitutional institutions of the country. The lockdowns in India were imposed under the Disaster Management Act, 2005. India's large population poses severe administrative challenges in dealing with any disaster, especially a pandemic like COVID-19. In the chapter titled *Panchayati Raj Institutions and Community Based Disaster Management*, Jeevan Kumar argues that invoking the Disaster Management Act 2005 to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has marginalized the elected local functionaries, local communities, and civic groups, including

community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Kumar thinks that imposing lockdowns under the said Act has fostered a hierarchical, bureaucratic, '*top-down*' approach to policymaking that gives the central, state, and district authorities sweeping powers. Kumar laments that only minimal attempt has been made to manage the pandemic from a 'bottom-up' perspective, despite the wealth of literature, as well as experience, extolling the benefits in adopting a democratic, decentralized, and participatory approach, with the active involvement of the people and community at the ground level. The author suggests that biological disasters like pandemics of a national magnitude necessitate close administrative and political coordination, led by the Union and followed by state, district and local governments, disaster management authorities, and other stakeholders, which include CBOs, NGOs, self-help groups (SHGs) and the youth at the local level. Kumar points out that in the true spirit of federalism and decentralization, national and state political and administrative agencies should be more collaborative and consultative in handling disasters and pandemics. He suggests that panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) through the gram sabha and village committee on disaster management institutions can establish links with the community, CBOs, and other players in the field and facilitate and regulate community-based disaster management (CBDM) activities. According to him, the District Planning Committee and the Disaster Management Committee of the district can potentially integrate the gram panchayat development plan (GDPD) with the disaster management plan. It is widely accepted that community-based disaster management is a process to capacitate communities to effectively prevent, mitigate, and cope with disasters. Thus, the author argues that PRIs can act as catalysts in the social mobilization process and tap the traditional wisdom of the local communities to complement the modern practices in disaster mitigation.

Besides the severity of the COVID-19, it is to be noted that the pandemic has resulted in several social, economic, political, and cultural crises across the world, and India is no exception in this regard. In the chapter titled *Women's Work and Livelihood during COVID-19: Reconceptualising Panchayats in an Ecological Perspective*, Bidyut Mohanty thinks that the pandemic has warranted a new development path centred on ecology and steered primarily by women at the grassroots level. Mohanty further argues that the challenges posed by the COVID-19 have forced us to think boldly on an alternative path of development that is more sustainable, gender-just, egalitarian, and above all based on the principle of self-governance at the grassroots level. Mohanty opines that the pandemic has taught us to challenge and replace the development model driven by the global market economy in the pre-pandemic period and urges that the alternative has to

emerge from the harmonious relationship between nature and humans that the indigenous communities still practise in many forms in their day-to-day lives, production systems, health and work habits and routines. The author further argues that the alternative development strategy should be designed in such a way that it respects the ecology, the rights of the marginalized sections of the society, including women, children, senior citizens, differently-abled, as well as members of the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and other minority communities. The author suggests that the time has come for the local governments to acquire the capacity to be disaster resilient, allocate power and resources to plan for local development, and identify suitable job opportunities for the unemployed. The paradigm of the ecological economy makes the local area truly autonomous and self-governing, according to her. Mohanty adds that if power is decentralized to the local governments and the right to frame alternative models of development is exercised by them with women playing the central role, the prospects of ecological economy saving mother earth and her children, including all the species, will be brighter.

COVID- 19 has led to a severe and widespread increase in global food insecurity and the impact of the pandemic on food security and nutrition in India, which is home to the largest number of undernourished persons in the world, should be seriously looked into in this context. The chapter titled *The Role of Food Banks and Community Kitchens During and Post-COVID-19 Crisis: An Alternative Food Security Initiative* by Chongom Aron Aimol delves into the role of community kitchens and food banks in addressing the food insecurity in India during the lockdown and in the post-COVID era. Aimol argues that food banks and community kitchens play a crucial role in addressing food insecurity during the lockdowns and the post-COVID period. The author offers a descriptive and analytical study of the community kitchens run by the state and local governments in Kerala, Delhi, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal and the free distribution of food packets and drinking water by various civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious organizations, faith communities and self-help groups (SHGs) in India in the time of pandemic and the post-pandemic scenario. The author also offers a critical analysis on how far the food provided through community kitchens and food banks met clients' nutritional needs or target communities, such as migrant workers, street children, elderly, disabled, sick and homeless, unemployed persons, refugees, and destitute. Though the community kitchens were an essential component under the urban food security in the draft National Food Security Bill 2013, it was later dropped. Aimol explores the feasibility of amending

the existing Food Security Act or bringing new legislation to incorporate community kitchens under its framework. The author also examines how the governments, NGOs, and local community interventions could help food banks and community kitchens to address acute food insecurity on a short- and long-term basis. It is argued that food insecurity in India is a complex issue, and it requires collaboration between the central, state, and local governments and NGOs.

Social resilience is a multifaceted phenomenon and requires a holistic approach. Lavanya Suresh looks into the significance of social resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in the chapter titled *Social Resilience: The Role of Local Institutions in Addressing Vulnerability in Times of Crisis in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India*. Suresh argues that decentralization has improved social resilience and enhanced governance response in the face of the crisis but adds that there are still concerns that need to be addressed, particularly in the realm of social justice. Both governmental and non-governmental local institutions need to work in tandem to reduce vulnerability and increase resilience. The author offers case studies under the social resilience framework through the lens of five parameters - social structure, social capital, social mechanisms, social equity, and social belief. The author assesses the response modes to the pandemic by the state apparatus and social groups at the local level. While decentralized efforts have achieved a stable social structure, social capital, and social engagement mechanisms, they have not effectively overcome the challenges of caste, class, and gender discrimination. The author also looks into the different social and structural factors that supported and limited the governance of the crisis. She then lists out the vulnerabilities and the institutional innovations introduced in response to the pandemic. India is a highly divided society with inequalities in caste, gender, income, and religious lines. The author argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought these fissures out into the open and exposed the fragility of the livelihoods of the poor. The author opines that different government responses like 'work from home,' physical distancing, frequent hand washing, and the lockdown all assume a sense of privilege of having an independent and distant home from others, which only the middle and the more affluent classes have. The poor and the marginalized, in such circumstances, are left to fend for themselves.

Based on the five parameters of social resilience, Suresh suggests that resilience requires a bottom-up approach to be effective, which should be institutionalized in local government disaster management plans.

The situation arising out of COVID-19 indicates the need to provide immediate relief to the affected population and ensure the long-term sustainable development of districts with an all-inclusive approach. The pandemic has impacted governance at the national level and the regional and local levels across the world. In India and countries with similar federal structures, variation in the extent of impact has been seen amongst states and regions and amongst districts. In the chapter titled *District Planning in Post-COVID-19 Scenario: Assessment of Possibilities*, Ramit Basu argues that the pandemic, apart from posing challenges, has also opened up new opportunities for preparing district-level plans. District planning has become non-negotiable given that inter and intra-district variations are observed in the manner the pandemic has affected the population. There is a need to look at poverty, health, urbanization, and environmental factors, among others, with equal emphasis and in an integrated manner. The district planning process in the post-COVID-19 scenario has to be based on innovation, out-of-the-box thinking, compassion, inclusion, convergence, local and global linkages, capacity building, and, most importantly, sustainability. The author suggests that the principles undergirding a District Plan should include non-discrimination; accessibility; participation; inclusive policies and programmes; convergence amongst schemes, departments, and other development agencies; absolute transparency at every level of planning, consolidation of the plan and its implementation; flexibility for mid-course correction; safeguards against violations, corruption, and vested interests; capacity building and hand holding support for key stakeholders; data and information for development, and ensuring of funds for implementation of the plan. The District Planning Committees (DPCs) and the local governments at every level, and the line department officials at the district and block levels will have the responsibility to prepare a coherent plan and ensure its implementation through multistakeholder participation. For this to occur, the DPCs should be institutionally strengthened with authority and resources to design the district plan independently and implement it.

Again, the struggle against COVID-19 and the need for fair socio-economic recovery illustrates that decentralized governance and public action are necessary but insufficient. Partly, this is because of the prevalence of clientelist, authoritarian, or neo-liberal government in many contexts, including in the previously celebrated Swedish welfare system. Kerala's struggle against COVID-19 and the quest for socio-economic recovery suggest that decentralization unaccompanied by other complementary measures is insufficient. Olle Törnquist's chapter titled *Linking Public Action: Kerala's Challenges in Comparative Perspective* argues that though

Kerala suffers less from clientelism and authoritarianism than many other parts of the world and less from neo-liberal governance than welfare states like Sweden, it is affected by a universal dilemma of how to unify numerous actors and build links between the local and wider government, economy and popular actions. These challenges have remained unresolved since the beginning of Kerala's celebrated campaigns for decentralization and participatory development. Some of the missing links could have been factored into the state-wide policies envisioned in the 2020 local election campaign and the five-year budget – to combine, on the one hand, productive and job-creating welfare measures and, on the other, investments in infrastructure and education towards inclusive knowledge-based development. While Törnquist states that there is certainly no quick recipe for containing the virus with better-orchestrated measures, in a longer perspective, the roadmap is supported by positive experiences from elsewhere - of forming broad alliances to forge and implement wide welfare policies that foster production. The author suggests that paradigmatic models of democratic partnership governance such as from Scandinavia are valuable sources of inspiration, but cannot be copied, given the lack of high state capacity and strong, unified national organizations. Positive experiences from the Global South of forming broad alliances for the development and implementation of welfare reforms, like the universal public health reform in Indonesia, are worthy of examination. Törnquist thinks that despite some success, the democratic format of partnership governance remains a challenge in Kerala.

Usually, the provincial governments devolved funds, functions, and functionaries to the local governments, who follow prescribed guidelines to allocate and implement schemes and programmes based on subsidiarity. But, at present, there are several government agencies/ departments, including Anganwadi centres, primary health centres, primary schools, mid-day meals scheme, drinking water and sanitation, public distribution system, MGNREGA scheme for rural employment, self-help groups, and NGOs that are operating at the village panchayat level. In the chapter titled *Challenges faced by Local Governments post-COVID-19*, V. Y. Ghorpade examines and attempts to redefine the role of local governments in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic that disproportionately affect the poor and marginalized sections living in the rural areas. Ghorpade argues that there is an urgent need to redefine the role of the three-tier rural local governments in India, namely, gram panchayat (GP) at the bottom, taluk panchayat (TP) in the middle, and zilla panchayat (ZP) at the district level.

The three tiers receive funds from different sources, including central government grants, state government grants, finance commission grants, local taxes, own income, MPLAD (MP Local Area Development), MLA Local Area Development, and so on. However, Ghorpade states that these funds are reaching the panchayats through different channels. One is unaware of how much of this is for development and how much for salaries and other administrative expenses. Hence, there is a need to determine the total resource envelope of a local government from all sources under the heads of development and non-development funds and then place it before the gram sabhas (village assemblies of all voters). Ghorpade also underlines the importance of District Planning Committees (DPCs). He argues that all funds identified in the resource envelope should have the concurrence of the DPCs. The author thinks that the decentralized planning process could become meaningful only on the foundation of a strong resource envelope. In the absence of DPCs scrutinizing the resource envelope, funds tend to be independently devolved to the panchayats, resulting in duplication of works, funds from different sources flowing to the same work, and resorting to intentional delays in project completion by vested interests.

The funds, functions, and functionaries that support the decentralized planning process at the grassroots level must impact the quality of life of individual families in the village. A scientifically created database or a performance management system consisting of measurement, feedback, and positive reinforcement is necessary for this to occur. Ghorpade concludes the chapter with a call for a paradigm shift in the very idea of self-governance that would lead to a better quality of life of the villages, provision of social security measures, and sustainable livelihood post-COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) of India puts the onus of delivering services in times of disaster on local governments. Following the pandemic-induced lockdown, migrant workers across India were at the receiving end, and in cities like Bengaluru, migrant workers did not have access to food and shelter. One of the main reasons for such callousness was the inefficient ground-level governance in urban areas. Karnataka is one of the few states with a decentralized disaster management mechanism with Ward Disaster Management Cells (WDMCs) under the ward committees. But the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) council overlooked this fact in its fight against COVID-19. In the chapter titled *Ward Disaster Management Cells (WDMCs) in Urban Local governments: CIVIC's Activism for local government capacitation and the BBMP*, Kathyayini Chamaraj argues that, in the absence of the WDMCs, there was no database

of the poor and the needy at ward level, and it resulted in poor coordination in relief measures. Chamaraj feels that ward-level disaster management cells and citizen committees need to carry out community-based bottom-up planning for sustainable and inclusive development and provide a more systematized, localized, and humane response to disasters and pandemics. Chamaraj, a social activist and an executive trustee of CIVIC, a non - profit organization based in Bangalore, also offers a detailed account of the interventions made by the organization, mainly how an email from CIVIC to the Karnataka High Court played an instrumental role in setting up WDMCs. The author argues that if the institutionalized WDMCs had been set up, the needs of the vulnerable and the needy in every ward could have been better identified and addressed. Following the intervention made by the CIVIC, the Court directed the BBMP to set up WDMCs in 198 wards.

The chapter titled *Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Three Neighbourhoods in Kolkata* by Anwasha Chakraborty assesses the impact of pandemic-induced lockdown in selected neighbourhoods in Kolkata city. Chakraborty states that the effect of the lockdown on people varied from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. She cites the case of Bagbazar-Shyambazar in the northeastern region of the city. The three neighbourhoods selected for the study were characterized by class and ethnic differences. The older understanding of neighbourhoods in Kolkata dominated by patron-client relationships has vastly transformed following the outbreak of COVID- 19. The author states that the ‘neighbourhoods’ have been turned into spaces where informal power relationships operate to support the state-level ruling party. The author further argues that, following the COVID-19 outbreak, urban planning and ‘management of the city’ have assumed new meanings. Local strategies to manage the crisis faced by workers on daily wages, including migrant labourers, evolved during the pandemic-induced lockdown. The author states that the political contour of the neighbourhood is produced by the tripartite negotiations between political society, civil society, and the state as they mobilize their respective organizational and collective resources to protect livelihoods, civic rights and maintain public order. The author sees neighbourhoods not only as sites of transformation but also as heterogeneous sources of urban politics. The author argues that more than the union government, the state governments, including those of West Bengal, Kerala, and Odisha, have been capable of mitigating and managing the pandemic more effectively.

The chapter titled *Role of Local Governments in the New Normal and the Next Normal: Bangladesh Experience* by Pranab Kumar Panday and Mohammad Jahangir Hossain Mojumder explores the role of local

government institutions in mitigating the COVID-19 crisis and the management of the post-pandemic situation in Bangladesh. The authors offer a theoretical understanding of the role played by the local governments in Bangladesh during disasters and in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that the Bangladesh government chose de-concentration as a basis of decentralization in that it empowered the central government to control the local governments. The authors further say that most of the measures and initiatives related to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic were entrusted to the central government departments, especially the health department since health falls under the purview of the central government and not the local government. Though the Union Parishad Act of 2009 legally empowers the Union Parishads (the lowest tier of Bangladesh's existing local government) to work on health-related issues, particularly to take visible actions to control the epidemic with available resources locally, the potential of the Parishads was not utilized fully. They were primarily involved in distributing Social Safety Net (SSN) benefits to the people and preparing the list of beneficiaries eligible for BDT 2,500 (about \$30) per family. Panday and Mojumder argue that issues like incapacity, shortage of human resources, medicine, and other facilities in Union Health Centre, which are managed by Union Parishads and community clinics at the grassroots level, obstruct people's opportunity to receive regular health advice and COVID-19 related healthcare services. The authors also suggest that corruption, clientelism, the insufficient capacity of the Union Parishads, and lack of discretionary power with the deconcentrating type of governance hinder seamless performance in service delivery and distribution of government amenities to the marginalized people in the pre-pandemic era as well as during the COVID-19 outbreak. The authors also discuss the various challenges faced by the local government in Bangladesh, including the actual level of decentralization, the uncertainty of resource flow and lack of locally collected revenue, lack of coordination, and the problem of patron-clientelism, nepotism, and corruption, which are hampering the effective service delivery of SSN programmes and benefits to the marginalized.

The authors add that in the post-pandemic period, the 'next normal', emphasis should be given to the empowerment of local governments and healthcare services in Bangladesh. The government should prioritize setting up disaster management committees at the local level. Further, developing standardized communication materials to create awareness among the public and disseminate timely information is necessary. The authors feel that local governments should be equipped to bargain in specific contexts

and improve their responsiveness towards citizens with sufficient authority bestowed on them to perform.

In the chapter titled *Post COVID-19 Local Government under Federalism in Nepal*, Deepak Chaudhary assesses the responses of local government to the COVID-19 outbreak in Nepal. It discusses the prospect, feasibility, opportunities, and challenges for local governments in the post-pandemic era. Chaudhary also explores the problems faced by local governments during COVID-19 and puts forward various suggestions. Though the existing literature relating to local governments in Nepal refers to limited resources, the inefficacy of service delivery, poor coordination between multi-layers of governments, the inadequacy of legislation, and limited financial transfers/subsidies, the COVID-19 has further exposed the shortcomings in the country's governance system. The author further states that COVID-19 has meant that local governments need to be more capable and accountable for future readiness to tackle such pandemics. Though the present political system in Nepal favours localism and autonomy to a large extent, the deficiency of both managerial and governmental roles remains a challenge. Though Nepal faced political instability for decades, a federal system has come into being to address local development and diversity, which is structurally essential and supports the local level. The author states that local governments have proven to be the only centres of hope and trust of the local people. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for the local governments to reach out to the people and demonstrate the real essence of federalism. Chaudhary also argues that leadership effectiveness is crucial to make local governments more vibrant.

Governance and politics in the aftermath of the COVID-19 and its response to the pandemic have moved Sri Lanka into unknown trajectories that may have severe consequences in the long term, considering the country's post-conflict character. Gz. MeeNilankco Theiventhran, in the chapter titled *Quarantining local democracy: Pandemic politics in post-war Sri Lanka*, argues that while the COVID-19 pandemic has led to diverse forms of state responses throughout the world, Sri Lanka's centralized response to the pandemic has undermined the role of local democracy and has created questions about its future. Theiventhran feels that the idea of local government as a space for substantive local democracy has been challenged in post-war Sri Lanka, where the centralization of powers in the past decade has undermined the local democracy. It specifically hurt the minority population, which aggravated due to the pandemic. Theiventhran looks at the social, economic, political, and environmental implications of the pandemic and sustainability challenges concerning local governments. The

author offers his viewpoints and observations based on the empirical evidence he obtained through extensive virtual fieldwork during the pandemic supplemented with relevant case studies on Mass Movement for Social Justice (MMSJ), a grassroots-based social movement that predominantly functions in the Northern and Central provinces of Sri Lanka. The pandemic crisis was expected to create new avenues for local governments to engage with the people and become more reliable. Still, the author states that Sri Lanka's long history of sustained democracy was challenged in the backdrop of the COVID-19. This erosion of local democracy through pandemic response has depoliticized public spaces, weakened local institutions, and alienated the public from local governments. The pandemic has created the space, legitimacy, and logic to re-centralize state affairs and undermine local democracy within the present minimalist democratic framework. Local governance is generally seen as the site where "more democracy" is available to "common people" at the "local level," and the author opines that it is essential to understand that quarantining local democracy is equal to undermining it in the long run. The author asserts that pandemic politics has brought an institutional and socio-political crisis. Theiventhran concludes with the suggestion that, in the post-pandemic era, there is a need to rethink, rediscover, and reinvent the relevance and future of local democracy in theory and practice.

Post-Apartheid South Africa was already in the grip of the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality, all of which were further accentuated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its economic repercussions have impacted the supply chains of food. They have pressured multilateral food organizations to be more engaged and proactive in the quest for hunger relief, especially in developing nations. The South African media complimented individuals and community-based organizations for their contributions to ensure food relief during the COVID-19 lockdown regulations. Still, few took notice of local government food security initiatives during the pandemic. The chapter titled *Quest for Food Security in the EThekweni Municipality* by Dasarath Chetty and Sheetal Bhoola describes some of the food security policies and programmes implemented by the EThekweni Municipality. The authors argue that the EThekweni Municipality has initiated several programmes to solve food insecurity by building dedicated structures to drive "agriculture, aqua, and poultry farming," "community gardens," and soup kitchens. Food relief is primarily understood as an emergency intervention through government and relief organizations to ensure access to a cost-effective supply of food items to the vulnerable. South Africans have increasingly become more food insecure over the last decade due to rising unemployment rates and increasing

poverty. Chetty and Bhoola opine that these food relief initiatives, aimed at working in a participatory, democratic way with communities, may begin to reap the intended rewards in the quest for food sovereignty in post-pandemic South Africa.

In the chapter titled *Local Governments and COVID 19 in Ghana: Some Lessons for the African Continent*, Joseph R.A. Ayee examines the role of local governments in dealing with the COVID 19 pandemic in Ghana. Ayee talks about Ghana's relatively long history of decentralization and argues that the pandemic exposed the deep cracks in the country's health system, especially its lack of emergency preparedness and the efficacy of local governments. Although Ghana has implemented one of the most comprehensive decentralization policies on the African continent, the local governments were sidelined by the government in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened the situation. The policy and institutional responses of the government of Ghana tended to reinforce centralization rather than decentralization. The author identifies some valuable lessons the rest of Africa can learn from the experience of pandemic management by local governments in Ghana. One theme that Ayee explores is how the pandemic and its management has been widely politicized ahead of the December 2020 elections and argues that both the ruling party and the opposition engaged in politicization and partisanship of the issues around COVID- 19 to gain political mileage or dispense patronage. The author states that since decentralization itself is a political concept of winners and losers, the issue of which party can better deal with COVID- 19 using local governments will continue to be debated and contested. The author highlights the deleterious effect of power-play or politics in sabotaging constructive engagement in pandemic management. African governments should devolve more funds to create decentralized disaster resilience in the post-COVID world. The author also discusses the importance of transformative leadership at local and national levels and the need to build trust between state institutions and citizens as well as collaboration among all the stakeholders - state and non-state actors. The author also suggests that the African governments should invest in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as e-governance is crucial for effective service delivery in the post-COVID era.

Hellmut Wollmann in the chapter titled *Institutional development of subnational government in Western and Central East European countries: Between decentralization and re- centralization*, explores and compares the development at the sub-national government levels in some Western and Central European countries since the 1980s, adopting a historical approach.